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ABSTRACT

This analysis of Brazilian baby talk (BT) includes data from two sources: elicitations of the use of BT from three mothers, all of whom have university degrees, and observations of adult-child interactions in the home. The data shows Ferguson's modified list of thirty lexical items that frequently have BT forms in various languages and the corresponding Brazilian BT lexical item. Analysis of those BT items that are phonologically related to, or derived from, the adult standard form reveals a few basic and recurring processes that account for this relationship: reduplication, assimilation, elimination of unaccented syllables, and cluster simplification. The grammar of Brazilian BT is closer to the adult standard grammar than is the phonology. Observations indicate that, in general, the BT used by men is characterized more by the presence of grammatical features than phonological features, while the BT used by women is characterized by both types of features. BT features in Brazilian Portuguese are similar to those observed in other languages and can be described as manifestations of the basic processes that characterized the BT register: simplification, clarification, and the use of hypochoristic suffixes. (NCR)

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BABY TALK IN BRAZILIAN PORTUGUESE*

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Observers have noted that in speech communities throughout the world, adults use a special style of speech, or register, when talking with young children. This register, in English called 'baby talk' (hereafter BT), is often described as a simplified version of adult speech. Closer analysis has revealed, however, that the BT register is characterized not only by processes of simplification, but also by features which clarify adult speech by adding redundancy, and by the extensive use of diminutive or hypochoristic affixes.[1]

The analysis of Brazilian BT presented here is not intended as an exhaustive study of the use of BT in Brazil. It does not include data from different dialect areas, nor from different social classes, but is limited to BT forms used by middle-class parents, mostly mothers, residing in Campinas, São Paulo. The data come from two sources: elicitations of the use of BT from three mothers, all of whom have university degrees, and observations of adult-child interactions in the home. In the latter case, the adults observed included mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other adults who happened to be in the home.

Lexical items

Ferguson (1964) examined BT data from a number of studies of widely divergent languages (e.g. Gilyak, Comanche, Berber, among others) and found certain common features in the BT of these languages. On the basis of these studies, he drew up a list of thirty lexical items which frequently have BT forms in various languages. His list (slightly modified) and the corresponding Brazilian BT lexical items appear in Table I, below. Where more than one BT form is listed, the first form is the more (most) frequent.

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1. For a more complete description of the BT register, see Ferguson (1964, 1975).

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TABLE I

Category	Baby Talk	Adult Standard
Kin		
mother	mamãe, mami, mamá[a]	mãe
father	papai, papi, papá	pai
baby	nenê[b]	bebê, nenê
grandmother	vovó	avó
grandfather	vovô	avô
uncle	titio[c]	tio
aunt	titia	tia
nursemaid	babá, tata	babá
Body parts and body functions		
food	papá, papa, papinha	comida
to eat	papá	comer
to sleep	naná, mimí	dormir
to urinate	fazer chichí, pipí	urinar
to defecate	fazer cocõ	defecar
bath	bãinho, banhinho	banho
hurt	dodói, fazer dodói	machucado
to walk	dandá	andar
breast	mamá, teté	mama, peito
bottle	dedeira, delinha	mamadeira
penis	pipí, bim-bim	penis
vagina	chochota, pombinha	vagina
buttocks	bum-bum	nádegas
pacifier	pepê, peta, pepeta	chupeta
Qualities		
nice	bonitinho	bonito
bad	CC (alveolar click)	feio
dirty	caca, cacaca	sujo
hot	ffff, tente	quente
cold	fio	frio
nothing left	cabô, abô, bô, babau	acabou
little	pequeninho, pequetitico	pequeno
Animals		
dog	auau, babau	cachorro
cat	miau, chaninho	gato
bird	piu-piú, pipiu, pupú	pássaro
chicken	cocó, titi	galinha
horse	tom-tóm, pikau-pikau	cavalo

Notes to TABLE I:

(a) In Portuguese, stress generally falls on the penultimate syllable, except for words ending in -z, -l, -r, or diphthongs. Vowels marked with a written accent: ^ or ´ are stressed.

(b) The stressed vowels e and o are open when marked by an acute accent, e.g. café, avó, closed when the accent is circumflex, e.g. nenê, avô.

(c) The BT forms for uncle (titio) and aunt (titia) are also used in referring to adult friends of the family.

TABLE I (cont.)

Category	Baby Talk	Adult Standard
Games		
good-bye	tau-tau, tchau-tchau	tchau
goblin	bicho-papão, cuca	----
carry on back	upa, dar uma upa	montar
count fingers [d]		
little	minguinho	minimo
ring finger	seu vizinho	anular
middle finger	pai-de-todos	medio
index finger	fura-bolo	indicador
thumb	mata piolho	polegar
peek-a-boo	ú-u, achou	----
hide-and-seek	cadê, esconde-esconde	----
Other		
shoe	papato	sapato
clock	tic-tac	relógio
car	bibí, fom-fóm	carro
tricycle	tico, tico-tico	velocípede
smile! (tweeking the child's chin)	bilú-bilú	---
spank	fazer tátá	dar um tapa

Phonology

In comparing the BT forms with the corresponding adult standard (AS) forms in the table above, it can be seen that many of the BT words are phonologically related to the AS form (e.g. BT mamãe: AS mãe 'mother'), while others bear little or no resemblance to the AS form (e.g. BT bibí: AS carro 'car'). In many cases the BT words are onomatopoeic, especially in the category of animal names; in other cases, the phonological relationship between BT and AS forms is not so apparent.

Analysis of those BT items which are phonologically related to, or derived from, the AS form reveals that a few basic and recurring processes can account for this relationship. The most common process is that of reduplication which can be seen in the following pairs of words: AS mãe: BT mamãe; AS pai: BT papai; AS tio: BT titio, and others. In addition to reduplication, other processes occur, but with less frequency. These include:

a) assimilation, e.g. AS quente: BT tente; AS acabou: BT babo; AS sapato: BT papato.

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d) Translations of the BT terms for the names of the fingers: minguinho: the littlest one, seu vizinho: his neighbor, pai-de-todos: father of (them) all, fura bolo: put a hole (in the) cake, mata piolho: kill lice.

b) elimination of unaccented syllables, e.g. AS chupeta: BT peta; AS mamadeira: BT dedeira.

c) cluster simplification, e.g. AS frio: BT fio.

A general phonological feature of Brazilian BT is the palatalization of the voiceless fricative [s], e.g. AS ['dosi]: BT ['doši] (candy); AS [vo'se]: BT [vo'še] (you). This feature is not limited to BT but occurs in AS as well as a marker of affection or intimate speech.

Every language appears to have a preferred canonical form for BT words, and analysis of the items in Table I shows that the basic canonical form in Brazilian Portuguese is CVCV(V). Within this form, the consonant is almost always reduplicated and is usually labial, dental or alveo-palatal (i.e. front). The vowels are also reduplicated although in some cases the second vowel is nasalized while the first is not, or vice-versa.

In AS Portuguese, stress generally falls on the penultimate syllable (except for words ending in -l, -r, -z, or a diphthong)[2]. The great majority of words in Portuguese conform to this general stress pattern. In the majority of BT items listed in Table I, however, stress falls on the final syllable, creating a pattern which contrasts sharply with that found in AS Portuguese. Examples of final stress include: mamãe (mother), papai (father), vovô (grandfather), vovó (grandmother), papá (food), pepê (pacifier), auau (dog), cocó (rooster),etc.

The supra-segmental features of Brazilian BT are similar to those used in other languages studies. In general, adults speak more loudly, more slowly, and in a higher pitched voice when talking with young children. These changes in speech style seem to be part of the process of clarification, one of the common processes of BT in all languages.

Grammar

The grammar of Brazilian BT is closer to the AS grammar than is the phonology. There are, however, a few notable modifications. The most striking of these is the extensive use of the diminutive suffix: -inho~-zinho. This suffix occurs with adjectives, e.g. bonitinho (nice), quentinho (hot), pequenininho (little), as well with nouns, e.g. gatinho (kitty), livrinho (little book), Joãozinho (Johnny), and is used, in most cases, as an indication of affection rather than size. The diminutive suffix also occurs in adult speech, but with less frequency.

Another grammatical feature is the use of third person nouns instead

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2. Orthografically, words with stress on the antepenultimate or on the final syllable (except those ending in -l, -r, -z, or a diphthong) require a written accent.

of first and second person pronouns. Thus, a parent talking to his child refers to himself as 'papai' or 'mamãe' and addresses the child as 'nenê' (baby) or by his name. For example, a father will say: "Papai vai embora" (Daddy is going) rather than: "Eu vou embora" (I am going), or: "Nenê quer biscoito?" (Does baby want a cookie?) rather than: "Você quer biscoito?" (Do you want a cookie?)

The extended use of the verb 'fazer' (do, make) is yet another grammatical feature of Brazilian BT. This verb is used in the formation of verbal phrases, expressing ideas which, in the adult language, are expressed by single verbs. In the list of items in Table I, we find the following BT forms with 'fazer': BT fazer chichí: AS urinar 'urinate'; BT fazer cocô: AS defecar 'defecate'; BT fazer dodói: AS machucar 'hurt'; BT fazer tátá: AS dar um tapa 'spank'.

In the data collected, there are a few examples of a difference in gender between the BT form and the corresponding adult form. The BT word for 'breast', for instance, is masculine: o mamá while the AS word is feminine: a mama; also, the BT form for 'food': o papá differs in gender from the AS form: a papa meaning 'pureed food'. Although these BT words are clearly related to, and perhaps derived from, the AS forms cited, they can also be derived from corresponding infinitival forms. Analysed in this manner, the BT forms o mamá and o papá would be derived from the infinitives mamá(r) 'to nurse' and papá(r) 'to eat', respectively. This alternative analysis is supported by the following arguments: a) the BT forms have final stress as do the infinitives, b) the nominalized form of infinitives is always masculine, and c) there are very few words in AS Portuguese ending in -á, all of which are borrowed forms. In my opinion, the second analysis is preferable; however, due to the limited number of cases of apparent change of gender in the BT forms, it is difficult to formulate a definitive hypothesis as to the derivation of these words.

Use and attitudes

The data obtained from the limited number of informants and observations made for this study indicate that some features of the BT register occur in the speech of most adults. The use of the register was observed in the speech of adults of both sexes and also in older children. As might be expected, BT occurs more frequently in women's speech, especially mother's speech, but is by no means limited to women. Observations indicate that, in general, the BT used by men is characterized more by the presence of grammatical features than phonological features, while the BT used by women is characterized by both types of features. In addition to its primary use -- communicating with children -- BT is also used in talking to domestic animals and in intimate talk between adults.

Although BT is widely used, attitudes regarding its use vary. Some men identify BT with women's speech and thus feel it improper for men to use. Many parents feel the extensive use of BT may be detrimental to their children's linguistic development, and consequently try to avoid using it (generally without success). In contrast to this view, clinicians

in a speech clinic in the area use and teach lexical items and grammatical structures of BT in trying to establish a basic vocabulary for hard-of-hearing or otherwise linguistically-impaired children.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that the BT features found in Brazilian Portuguese are similar to those observed in other languages. In general, these features can be described as minifestations of the basic processes which characterize the BT register: simplification, clarification, and the use of hypochoristic suffixes.

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